



Interview with Steve Biko

Gail M. Gerhart

In October 1972, Steve Biko was employed by the black division of the Study Project of Christianity in Apartheid Society (SPRO-CAS), which had its office in the same building as the South African Student Organization (SASO) at 86 Beatrice Street, Durban. American political scientist Gail M. Gerhart interviewed Biko in those offices on October 24, 1972, amid a constant flow of SASO people in and out. The interview is published here for the first time. It has been edited for length; a full transcript is available in the Historical Papers division of the Cullen Library at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, and on microfilm in the Karis-Gerhart Collection, available through the Cooperative Africana Microform Project (CAMP) of the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago.

What can you tell me about the intellectual origins of the black consciousness movement?

We have to see this evolution of black consciousness side by side with other political doctrines in the country, and other movements of resistance. I think a hell of a lot of this is attributable to the sudden death of political articulation of ideas within black ranks, which came about as a result of the banning of all the political parties. And here I think, the operative feature is that the only people who were left with some sort of organizations from which to operate were white people. Between 1912 and 1960 blacks could speak through one form of organization or another, be it ANC, trade union movements, or later the CP [Communist Party] and other political parties. So when they were banned in 1960, effectively all black resistance was killed, and the stage was left open to whites of liberal opinion to make representations for blacks, in a way that had not happened in the past, unaccompanied by black opinion.

Between 1960 and 1967, the only strong elements of dissent came from groups like NUSAS [National Union of South African Students], the Progressive Party, particularly the Young Progressives, and elements of the Liberal Party that had diffused into other organizations like Defense and Aid - which were in fact white organizations, white dominated in terms of members but open in terms of membership. The best blacks could do was just to be there, and to allow whites to speak on their behalf. And all blacks were doing all this time was just to clap and say "amen."

In '67 the [NUSAS] conference had some inroads. We went there expecting to stay on the campus. As we were leaving we got word that the conference was in fact going to be segregated, in the sense that although we would be at the university, whites would stay in one residence and we would stay in another. Our immediate response was that conference must close; this was my own response-until the organizers can find a proper venue. It was my first year within the movement, and I had sort of sorted out a few ideas, from friends and from reading. The conference proceeded, but I had made up my mind at that stage that this was a dead organization; it wouldn't listen to us, and that no useful and forthright opinion can be expressed from the aegis of this organization. So what I began to do even at that conference was to begin to caucus with the blacks.

And then the next move we made was the following year [at the NUSAS conference in July 1968]. What we ultimately did was to use an occasion that arose over this permit law. There was a big argument. Africans can only stay for 72 hours within a white area. So at the end of the first 72 hours a debate was introduced as to what should be done. Do we take a walk out of the magisterial area and come back for a new 72 hours, or do we defy the law. Now the whites were claiming that no, we should just take a walk. Some of the blacks from the very restrictive campuses were also agreeing with this; they didn't want to do anything dramatic that would reveal their presence there. A few of us were claiming that this was nonsense: we stay right here. Now what made the whites hysterical about what we were saying was that we said all right, when the vans come to collect us, whites should all lie in front of the vans so that they don't move. Then we'll allow the police to do what they like with blacks. You just lie there and don't move. The whites could not accept this. They saw it as an extremely irresponsible, radical line that didn't take into account the interests of the students on the restricted campuses. Our approach was: good, you whites are now bullshitting us into accepting your logic and your analysis of the situation. In fact this decision should be ours, because we are the only people who are affected; we are the only people who carry passes; we need permits-you don't need them-so this is one time you should learn to listen.

Then there was a huge two-hour debate on this thing. The whites were saying "Bull! You are introducing racialism"; and we were saying "Bull! You are introducing baasskaap [white supremacy]." So eventually we realized that if we subjected the issue to a vote we might lose because of the fringe number of blacks who might vote with the whites. So we said even this decision to vote depends on us. And as far as we see it, there is no need to vote; we blacks are just having a meeting 1 o'clock tomorrow. All blacks must come. Now at this stage we were only arguing about the people who need to have the permits, and these were only Africans, you see? But we had agreed already in our analysis of the other groups, like the Indians and Coloureds who didn't need to have permits, were also part of the oppressed camp.

The discussion on the 72 hour law took exactly ten minutes. We came there and we said listen, it's a waste of time to even argue this. We don't want to participate in protest politics like these guys have been telling us to do for these many years. We are here for constructive purposes. So this 72hour law must be left aside, and we just walk across the border. Now let's begin to talk about our business as blacks.

So then I had introduced a whole new trend of thinking, and I had to do this by asking questions and by using this particular example, this recent debate. By drawing the attention of the crowd to the fact that we are taking a back seat in our own battle. We are making ourselves watchers - we are watching the match from the touchlines, whereas it's a match in which we ought to be participating, primarily I spoke a lot about the influence of white thinking in blacks' attempting to make viable decisions, in their struggle. And I pointed out several examples from the same conference where if we were alone we would have taken one decision, but because we were there with those other guys we take another decision. And people saw this, you know; it was so simple. And it was dramatized a hell of a lot by the debate on this same 72hour law. So people just accepted this. They said right; we put up a committee to call a conference in December for blacks to talk about themselves.

[By 1968] we were receptive to other influences, influences much more from Africa, guys who could speak for themselves. This was a novelty in the country which many people couldn't see. That blacks in this last ten-year period had been subjected to so much suffocation by representation by whites, representation by this, by that - that to speak for themselves was a novelty. Again, now, talking primarily about the young group. The older people might perhaps have accommodated this. We couldn't accommodate this.

Now the influence from Africa was very important at that time. People like Fanon, people like Senghor, and a few other poets, Diop and company. They spoke to us, you know. These people obviously were very influential.

What I'm trying to say here is that it wasn't a question of one thing out of a book and discovering that it's interesting. In a sense it was also an active search for that type of book, for the kind of thing that will say things to you, that was bound to evoke a response.

There was a bit of influence from groups like the SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee], you know-statements from Stokely [Carmichael] and a few others. I'm talking about SNCC primarily because of the similarity in terms of organizational arrangement. And then later, of course, from books like this one by Stokely and [Charles] Hamilton [Black Power], it made a hell of a lot of sense in one way, but people were shocked to see the differences primarily around the area of what is the end-goal. You know in the United States one almost accepts the inevitability of a common society, on the basis of what the white man says. And all the black man can hope to get there is recognition for himself within the whole society. Whereas in a country like this one, there is a hell of a lot of value system to be changed, changes in the common order of society, to make the general order of society truly black, and reflective of the fact that this is in Africa, you see. Unlike in the United States. So there are these differences. But there's no doubt that reading all those kind of background books sharpened people's articulation of their own standpoint, and where they wanted to go.

A hell of a lot of people who were peripheral to the movement joined the movement on the strength of what they read. Those who were in the so-called leadership, whatever their different aptitudes for reading- personally, I do very little reading. I rarely finish a book, I always go to find something from a book. Otherwise I read a book over a long period, when I'm going to sleep and so on. I'm talking about books that relate to people's philosophies, people's strategies and so on. I've been having Stokely's book now for I don't know how many years, since '68, '69. I haven't finished it. Or others, like [James] Cone's book; I've read parts of it, on black theology.

But others of course are much more avid readers than I am. They do a lot of reading, they do a lot of writing, interpretation, and so on. So that element has that kind of effect. What I'm saying is that it's a complementary effect upon a basic attitude formed primarily from experience, from an analysis of the situation as one sees it. And it helps to sharpen one's focus, it helps to make the guy much more confident about whatever he's actually articulating. The common experience of the Third World people.

Do you think that without this literature the ideology would have developed to the same degree of sophistication?

Inevitably yes, but perhaps at a much slower pace. But I think, one must remember again, even without the literature the most important element is the small insights we are given into Africa by the conservative press that we have in this country. A hell of a lot of them have what they regard as Africa series, or Africa columns, depicting what is said by so many different people in Africa, so many people in other parts of the Third World, Asia and Latin America, particularly China. This creates a focus for identification. So I would say the direction was inevitable. Perhaps what one might say is that the pace might have been slower. Its accuracy might have been much greater if the pace was even slower-accuracy in the sense that it was going to be a movement with the people, rather than a situation where one conceives an idea and actually addresses it very neatly, and then transposes it onto a situation. This was inborn, in a sense. Some people have found great difficulty in being able to analyze and see the difference between Fanon's France versus Algeria, or Stokely's white America versus black America, and our situation of whites versus blacks. Because people tend to do very little homework.

But that's not so much from our ranks. That's much more from hangers-on who come in, people who could not be convinced by indigenous argument. People who had to respect somebody else first from outside, read him, understand him in that situation and then say "Yah, those boys are right! Now this is what we should be saying!" The people who analyzed Nyerere and his works begin to see these things, then having accepted them [ask] what about the situation at home. So, you do get this kind of broad spectrum which differs in the sense of attaching different importances to little nuances - little nuances about post-revolutionary society, others opting for socialism, others opting for a nondescript type of nonracialism. You might say there is nonracial capitalist, nonracial socialist. Others might be opting for some kind of bantustan type of thing, like Gatsha's [Buthelezi] thing of black federation, or the adoption of a kind of black consciousness within the type of amorphous situation we have now. So there is this wide spectrum. But broadly speaking the authentic movement one could say talks of a non-exploitative, egalitarian, nonracialist society. And they're not prepared to expound on this any further. One knows why they will not do this.

Liberals decried apartheid and segregation and discrimination so that people refused to talk in any terms which in any way either simulated apartheid or segregation or discrimination. In fact it became a sine qua non that before you even started entering the arena of politics and fighting for social change you must be a nonracialist. And this explains why in fact it became necessary for SASO to mount such a heavy attack on liberals. They did a quick and good job. In one year, I think the campuses obliterated any strong trace of liberalism. And in the larger society, now going out of campus, blacks began to see that in fact it was a fallacy to think that before you fight you need to have a white man next to you, for the sake of depicting a non-racial society.

At the December 1968 conference was the name SASO coined?

Yes, we coined it right there. In fact the major ideas regarding a constitution, and so on were coined there. And what the conference was to do the following year was to give the thing a proper mandate in the various student areas. In one year, we had thrown NUSAS off the campuses and we had firmly entrenched SASO. Our first campus was Turfloop, and then came ours [University of Natal Non-European Medical School] - ours was a very developed campus - we were facing, as I said, two sides, the pro-NUSAS and the pro-PAC. Those PAC guys saw us as an extension of NUSAS.

On my campus I had been a NUSAS man the first year, so they tended not to trust this kind of approach. They were friends, you know, people we could talk to: we were in the same discussion circles. But they were very sensitive to plots, liberal plots. They knew there was a possibility that this just could be a liberal plot. And they used this argument about Indians and Coloureds a hell of a lot. Now we ultimately resolved it the following year and their camp was heavily defeated. They had organized there very heavily, they had called their people. And at that meeting they were very insulting. They used good tactics, insulting Indians and Coloureds, and Indians and Coloureds walked out, they thought they could now force the issue to a debate. We beat them thoroughly in the debate, we won a hell of a lot of their friends, and we beat them in the vote and the campus was affiliated. And they died at that moment.

Our attitude was that we are involved in a struggle, each group has got grievances, and we will work with people who are committed to work for a removal of the source of those grievances, be they African, Indians, or Coloureds. We're not going to operate on a liberal stance that there must be one Indian for one Coloured, etc. But if Indian and Coloured people are as much committed as obviously as some African people are committed to the struggle for our liberation-this is not a movement for Africans, not a movement for Indians, for Coloured people; it's a movement for people who are oppressed. And those who feel the oppression are going to join it. And that argument weighed very heavily. And we won.

In our preparation for the '71 conference, between '70 and '71, I went into a very extensive study of political movements in this country. This we did for our leadership training courses. Concentrating on the early so-called religious breakaways of 1890, the Ethiopian movement; concentrating on the foundation of ANC and reasons for the foundation of ANC; concentrating on the ICU [Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union], its operation, its growth, its cause of growth and its death, its cause of death. And concentrating on the foundation of the CP, its growth and its so-called death. That type of early history, right up to the time of the

Congress Alliance and ANC; in fact this is when I began to reject definitely elements of ANC. And a lot of the so-called socialist crap that used to come from CP and its ranks. Now the operations of CP as I saw it were highly suspect. I referred to this earlier on. Highly suspect, much more in terms of their observance of a strict code of discipline and adherence to Moscow's wishes than to the normal evolution of the movement toward social change. One couldn't blame them for wanting to maintain some degree of ideological purity amongst their ranks, but I think they had to adapt this a hell of a lot to the wishes of the people down here.

You remember, for instance, there were times when guys like S. P. Bunting went to the Transkei and organized very efficiently and had to cancel and break down all the structures there had been in the Transkei, purely on the strength of instructions from Moscow.

Looking at the operations of all political parties you'll notice that SASO doesn't lay too much stress on so-called post-revolutionary society. This is very deliberate. It's deliberate for a number of reasons, the most important one being the extent to which it divides people. PAC, ANC, CP, all these other groups had a lot of different slants to what they called post-revolutionary society. And as much as they sold their policies to people on the basis of what they were working for. In the same way white parties do. We see this as being much more to enunciate a common cause to which people should respond together and immediately, there's a need for a sense of identification with what's happening. Then once they come together, they can begin perhaps to play around with ideas. But one finds it terribly dividing to attach a lot of importance to the detail of the post-revolutionary society, before you actually attach people to the idea of fighting for the social change.

[In SASO] there is a common ideology which everybody accepts, and now it is a matter of different slants, different stresses on several points, within the common strategy. So you would say there is this gradual- one guy for instance is going to be radical on one point and rightist on one point - and they would mix (overlap). You get for instance a guy who is committed to violence and at the same time not so committed to socialism; you get another who is committed to socialism but not so committed to violence. So it's difficult to say in straight ideological terms there exists this kind of movement. But broadly speaking there is unity. There is unity primarily because there is the tacit recognition of a certain leadership. ...promoted the idea of BPC [the Black People's Convention]. Time wise, SASO pressed for a shorter time limit than other people were prepared to accommodate. They were prepared to work on a longer basis. And SASO guys - I guess had been convinced of their own strength in their own movement. They were of the opinion that people were ready to begin to move into - whereas other groups were beginning to imbibe this idea of black consciousness and so on and were really moving at a much slower pace, because of a slower acceptance of the ideology in their own ranks.

There is in South Africa an over-riding idea to move towards "comfortable" politics, between leaders. And they hold discussions among themselves about this.

Comfortable politics in the sense that we must move at a pace that doesn't rock the boat. In other words people are shaped by the system even in their consideration of approaches against the system. Not shaped in the sense of working out meaningful strategies, but shaped in the sense of working out an approach that won't lead them into any confrontation with the system. So they tend to accommodate the system, to censure themselves, in a much stronger way than the system would probably censure them.

For instance, there's no automatic ban on political movements in this country. But you get common talk to that effect amongst people, that any political agitation is banned. Which is nonsense. It's not banned. And our attitude is that the longer the silence, the more accustomed white society is going to be to that silence. And therefore the more stringent the measures are going to be against anybody who tries to undo that situation. Hence there must be some type of agitation. It doesn't matter if the agitation doesn't take a fully directed form immediately or a fully supported form. But there must be, in the minds of the people, in existence the idea that somewhere, somehow along the line we have our own thing going, and our own thing says this. And it must be only a matter of time before they are fully committed to it.

It's not a question of whether people are ready or not. It's a question of whether people should be made ready or not. You see when you talk of people being ready, I'm looking at it from a different sense. Are people ready for the final action, you see? Now the political party that is formed may not necessarily be the final form that we need to take, but it is some kind of measure, right? It needs to be there anyway to promote us towards the final step. So that whether people were ready or not is irrelevant. The point is is what's happening right or wrong. If it's wrong, then we need some kind of platform that's going to tell us what is right. And what to do in order to get towards that right. This is our justification for the existence of a political party.

And it becomes much more necessary and much more urgent when in fact people are being made by the system accustomed to be ineffective, phony telephones, that are meant to communicate with the white society, as if on behalf of blacks, when in fact they are against blacks. I'm referring here to these institutions of apartheid life - the bantustans, the CRC [Coloured Representative Council], the Indian council. All of which are set up by the system as "answers"-quote unquote-to our problems. They are part of the same system that has created the problem.

And this is where we come in. We want to come in at a stage when people have not been so thoroughly affected by the system and its little cocoons of racialism and oppression as to make them believe that in fact our solution lies in that system. If the silence is continued any longer this is inevitable. It has become a big problem already.

So this justifies the need for the emergence, the creation of a political party at this stage, as a constant reminder to the people that there's something wrong in this system. Something everywhere; what is right is this kind of thing.

We'd like to stop, first of all, the people from moving into the system and get them into our system. I'm talking about the people who are not in the system now. People who don't believe in the system. The urban African, for instance: the Asian and Coloured sectors have not been followed up completely. The rural Africans participate in a sense that people cannot fully understand at the moment. In Natal out of a sense of commitment, the old generation of kings and so on-and to what extent this implies an acceptance of the bantustans idea one doesn't completely know. The Cape African, this is true in the Cape particularly, has rejected chiefs and all that kind of nonsense. So there's minimal participation there. In Transkei there's a confused picture. Now this will become an interesting area to work in some time, but I think one needs to concentrate and work hard on the so-called urban people.

Rural people have a much more understandable group orientation than urban people, and hence it's faster to work among rural people than it is to work amongst urban people. But at the same time, what goes on in the rural area becomes heavily influenced by what goes on in the urban area, because of migratory labor. This is the importance therefore of conquering urban areas, because all of us go home for a certain while.. You know, so many things that attach to [migrant laborers] because of this old axis between the rural and urban person. Although the rural community is a closed community, it includes him in the sense that he belongs to it. All of them are not completely urban in a sense. They are open to influences once they're here, but a number of them still see their roots as being there. And there is a constant traveling between home and the work situation. It's useful.

The whole operation of SASO in black-power type of politics fists and slogans, you know, has incidentally caught up much, much more readily amongst workers-it's interesting to see the NIC [Natal Indian Congress] operating and SASO, again, where BPC is only really in its rudimentary stages. This is an area of Indian workers mainly. The NIC organized, or somebody organized, a meeting and there were several speakers, amongst whom there were several speakers from NIC. There was almost a unanimous rejection of people like [Arthur] Grobbelaar and these white trade unionists. And then Rajab and a few other Indian Congress people. And this was done on the basis of this so-called black power slogan "white man, go home," you

Europeans here, we don't want you-that type of thing. So that even looking at the Indian community, for instance, which a lot of people would say is likely to be resistant to say complete involvement in BPC programs; this only applies to the rich areas. When you go to the area where there are workers, to them it's not a problem, to identify with that kind of salute, that kind of coming into black power ranks. A feeling of oneness, basically, with the rest of the oppressed community. Viewing it from the same basis, a bunch of workers, like the dock workers have got the same sort of orientation basically. And any kind of demonstration of that kind of symbol is so much more meaningful to them than any number of speeches by people.

SASO see their role as being supportive to a political party. It would be difficult and I think stupid to try to make people identify with a student movement which is not going to play the leadership role in community affairs. Rather it would be more meaningful for people to identify with a political party in which students can then play a role, a supportive role. Because the dynamics of political change in an oppressed community revolve a hell of a lot around who your leader is. And your leader must be a man who can carry you right through. Now students can't do that.

People just won't look to students as their leaders.

That's right, yes. This has been our problem; even now it's still our problem. There is a hell of a lot of attachment to SASO in some quarters, and people tend to want to read more in to SASO than SASO ought to be. Obviously the same people in SASO are going to be much more active in another capacity in BPC, for instance. But here it is much more logical for it to be so, because then people can identify with a political party, which they can join or work in. It would be difficult to prompt the same identification with SASO and at the same time want to exclude people from joining because it's a student movement.

Isn't there a contradiction here, given the fact that older people are always more conservative? Isn't there some chance that these two bodies [SASO and BPC] will come to clash with one another?

No, for two reasons. Firstly, primarily because BPC is mainly made up of young people, and of course a few older sympathizers. And secondly because we have not seen all that much ideological difference between say middle-aged people and us, on this question of blackness. There will be differences, I agree, on specific issues. Like if all of us black people are now voting regarding action on a specific issue, the younger ones are going to opt for more violent, more militant action, and the older ones for less militant action. But on the broad question of blackness and the need to cooperate, that sort of thing, there's no real disagreement. Saths [Cooper] was telling me about a meeting in Chatsworth [Durban] where NIC spokesmen, who are

basically opposed to black consciousness, had to use that approach because that was the only message that could carry weight in Chatsworth, it's the only language people are going to listen to seriously.

In a sense I think the older generation has also given leadership status to the younger generation, in this particular field. If you go to a guy like [Curnick] Ndamse he'll say without any possible doubt that "those boys are right." He might put a few "buts." Primarily he sees himself not as a propagator of the idea. Whenever he speaks in public meetings, he is defending - if this is a hostile camp, like whites - what the younger generation is saying. Although he doesn't quite say it himself.

But we have very little faith in old people, and we don't think we have a lot of dependence on them. Although we are committed to totality of involvement, I think another very important aspect of our movement is to retain as much purity as we can. We wouldn't like to carry with us any hangers-on. We're happy with them saying that we are right, and following on behind, but not come interfere with us.

What about [Robert] Sobukwe?

I have never heard him express an opinion about the details of the ideology, which makes him again a very admirable guy. Unlike ANC ranks and other ranks, his major concern is about continued opposition to the system, and continued direction being given to the people. And from that angle he sees the whole new move as being important and valuable. The other guys-there's a whole host of priests and other fellows of that nature who are now in London, some in Europe anyway, who are of the older rank, well, say 42. I'd regard them as some of the most vociferous proponents of this whole ideology. And their stance has been much more affected by their being where they are now. They'd been talking, whilst they were here, in much more subdued tones than they are now that they're out. And this is occasioned, I think, by the ability for anybody from a struggle to view it much more critically when he's outside. He can see much more intelligently what role he could play there. And they're doing a hell of a lot of P.R.O. [public relations] work for this kind of ideology, particularly with groups from the country, ANC groups, PAC groups and so on, trying to make those fellows accept that in fact there's a new swing at home now. There's no more PAC, there's no more ANC; there's just the struggle. And this is the kind of ideology that they're talking.

I find this particularly valuable, precisely because of the existence of this long debate-silent debate in some quarters, noisy in some quarters-about the slant that SASO is taking. You know, is it a PAC slant or an ANC slant? Are they anti-communist or are they pro-communist? A lot of people attach meaning to some things we say, either in private or public; we have written or we have said on some platforms, very bad things about the Communist Party of South Africa, but that doesn't mean

necessarily that we are not socialists. According to South African communist-oriented people we are anti-. ..you know. That's a problem with people who are in the struggle; they are so keyed-up, screwed up with this kind of nonsense: are you pro-this or pro-that. And we have refused for three years now, four years, to identify ourselves in any direct sense with any group.

People don't commit themselves to ANC or PAC these days. You get people who commit themselves to the struggle. The distinction between ANC and PAC, incidentally, in the eyes of the masses is terribly thin.. .And the nuances of whether one is socialist, one is nationalist, one is this, one is that, never got down through into their minds. So that it's an intellectual debate that is meaningless. At home, some guys are emotional about the ANC. But okay, what is ANC? "It's a party for Africans!" You know? It's all he knows about ANC. He might know a leader and admire one-Mandela is the darling of ANC people, and Sobukwe of course darling of the PAC people. But you ask them what the difference is; they don't know. The radical difference that people see at the moment between those groups and us is this solidarity approach we're adopting. ANC people, on a mass basis, see this as different from ANC, primarily because ANC in its organization concentrated a hell of a lot on enunciating the policy for the top, but not for the bottom. And yet spent a lot of time quarreling with other groups because of their policies. In spite of the fact that in the eyes of the masses the difference was not so sharp.

In your view, is a white communist and a liberal white just basically the same thing?

No, not in terms of their ideologies, but in terms of their significance for the black struggle. They're pretty much the same when you consider their operations in the past, and their control measures, even down to the present day actually. They're different if you look at their slants. The liberals, Alan Paton and so on, one would reject at any stage, any stage be it now on up to the revolution. There are some leftist whites who have attachment to say the same rough principles of post-revolutionary society, but a lot of them are still terribly cynical about, for instance, the importance of value systems which we enunciate so often, from the black consciousness angle. That it is not only capitalism that is involved; it is also the whole gamut of white value systems which has been adopted as standard by South Africa, both whites and blacks so far. And that will need attention, even in a post-revolutionary society. Values relating to all the fields - education, religion, culture and so on. So your problems are not solved completely when you alter the economic pattern, to a socialist pattern. You still don't become what you ought to be. There's still a lot of dust to be swept off, you know, from the kind of slate we got from white society.

Do you mean that a person schooled in left-wing ideology won't accept that?

A number of them are defensive. You must remember they exist in South Africa, and they see themselves as threatened. A number of whites in this country adopt the class analysis, primarily because they want to detach us from anything relating to race. In case it has a rebound effect on them because they are white. This is the problem. So a lot of them adopt the class analysis as a defense mechanism and are persuaded of it because they find it more comfortable. And of course a number of them are terribly puritanical, dogmatic, and very, very arrogant. They don't quite know to what extent they have to give up a part of themselves in order to be a true Marxist.

But white society is quite agreed, in terms of the liberal-leftist axis, that blacks are being denied here and that blacks have to come up, they have to be lifted. A lot of them don't see that this entails them coming down. And this is the problem. We talk about that, and we get a whole lot of reaction and self-preservation mechanisms from them.

I would say it's submerged by a greater wish, I think, to see international cooperation on a pan-black basis. Which is essentially really a long-term war with the so-called first and second worlds; fighting exploitation, and arising out of exploitation, fighting oppression of the third world. This is the preoccupation of blacks now, and it's in line with black feelings in so many other parts of the world. The United States of Africa issue is not such a hot issue as it was in '65, '64-'65. There is no more unanimous approval of what happens in Africa, as there was at that time. There is criticism of India, for its refusal to move in a faster manner towards a much more mass-oriented economic system. So that it's difficult now to tie people's attention completely to Africa as in the past. Remember in '65 all these countries who achieved freedom for their countries were hailed as heroes by everybody, Nkrumah, Kenyatta, Banda, the whole lot. This was normally the case. People are much more critical now. So the commitment has changed now, I would say, to the appreciation of the importance of international cooperation.

What is a "formation school?" Or what sort of leadership training do you have?

The pattern is normally to pick out an area and concentrate on it, an area within our broad concern. On this particular occasion (referring to document on black consciousness) we were concentrating on the whole ideology of black consciousness. It was in three parts. The rationale behind it was to make a definition, and some practical application of black consciousness.

On other occasions, like in December this year the topic we picked was education, attitudes to education, as the key area around which it was structured, our leadership training course. To analyze exactly what students see as meaningful

education, to analyze the whole classroom approach, and perhaps spill over to methods of literacy training. The areas are vastly different. As I said, last year and the year before, they picked the history of the black struggle here. That's when we went through the evolution of the religious movements, trade union movements of the past, political movements of the past.

It's normally a four or five day training period, during which all the discussions are closed discussions. There's no public participation at all. And people go into in-depth discussions around major inputs by one or two picked people, depending on the topic. We have a regular set of so-called student leadership, and this one is merely meant for efficiency at the student committee level. People who are coming in to serve on student committees at the beginning of the year; they are subjected to some amount of training, technical approach to the problems of student leadership. So it's a two-way process.

There's a branch virtually in every university and college; at the last conference there were about ten campuses represented. There's been a drastic increase in the number of branches not based on campuses too, primarily because of the May [1972] student revolts. A lot of them have gone out to open branches in their respective areas. Before, there were four main branches outside campuses. Now there are more than double that number, in smaller towns - Kroonstad, Kimberley, Vryheid, Springs. Set up by students who left university during the disturbances. At the last conference there were six towns represented and eight campuses.

Is there any particular advantage to having the headquarters here in Durban?

No, it's just a historical aberration. Perhaps there is, in the sense that Durban is not so easy to categorize in terms of group areas. Jo'burg is mainly white in the middle, and the other areas are demarcated and separate. Whereas in Durban there is this whole meeting ground of this half of town. It is supposed to be an Indian area, and it is accessible therefore to all groups. There are no restrictions attached to Africans regarding Indian areas, whereas this does happen if we were to say establish an office in an African area. An Indian would have to get permission to be there. Because of this type of arrangement it is easier to get people to allow us to be sub-tenants.

What do you think the attitude of the government is toward SASO?

It's obviously watching. You see, unlike the old movements, which they could easily associate with communism - or violence, which they still define as communism - their initial analysis of SASO was that it sounded like an organization which was going to function along the kind of lines they wanted to see. But the pronouncements are obviously unabashedly anti-government. They haven't

outlawed black consciousness as a philosophy in the same way that they've outlawed socialism. So that nobody can be held to ransom for preaching black consciousness. In any case it would be extremely untenable for them to preach white power and outlaw what they regard as black power.

Now a few of their very intelligent people have suggested that before the government can do anything, it would have to outlaw black power in one form or another. But the less intelligent of the Nationalist government officials are still attempting to explain away the existence of SASO in terms of a rejection of liberals. Primarily because they see their war as being primarily against whites who side with blacks, rather than blacks. They accept it *ipso facto* that blacks are going to be satisfied, but they have always regarded the whites who work with blacks as more dangerous. As agitators, and in terms of technical know-how and so many things. They simply don't believe that blacks are intelligent enough to enunciate their own ideas properly on their own. So this whole SASO game they're still watching. One would like to feel that they have made up their minds that there's a link somewhere between SASO and some white-oriented group. And they think time will tell. I think that's the kind of rationale they have. Because they've done nothing drastic. They've made a few inroads, but they normally make it possible to provide another explanation for what they do.

Why would they so quickly go to destroy UCM, while leaving SASO?

It's the same link again. They believe it's much more dangerous. What I'm saying is that the government hasn't taken us seriously at all.

Because it's all black?

Yes - it's not intelligent, no expertise, and so on. And all the time just watch out to see if this is really all black, that there aren't any sideline connections with whites. Obviously in time they're going to be increasingly more vigilant; they're going to take much more definite action. Except that it is too late in a sense. We don't need an organization now to push the kind of ideology we are pushing. It's there; it's already been planted. It's in people. They could ban five of us; it makes no real difference. It might delay things in some quarters; it might confuse people for a while. But it can have no lasting effect.

We've got a very broad front which is completely unintimidated. And this is one of the things I ought to have mentioned, talking about lessons from history. This constant change in leadership in SASO is partly to accommodate a very quick graduation of people into a certain level. To effectively silence SASO, they'd have to ban no less than 20 people, that is to effectively silence the leadership ranks. But

even there, having banned the 20 people, there'd still be more. Unlike in some of the old movements, where leadership was concentrated around individuals.

I believe security has also made up its mind that they should deal with us court-wise for as long as we are manageable. To actually try to catch us breaking laws. So they are playing a watching-game on all those fronts. And it's a long watching game, because all of them are wrong.

Security does come out with a pretty insightful analysis of what they think we think. Like when they question some of us they will say "so- and-so is infiltrating the movement." And by saying this-although it's meant to be a question-it gives you the idea that they've made up their minds that there must be somebody who is the main force. And they always make the statement that SASO is alright, were it not for-then they go into the influences by [Strini] Moodley and Saths [Cooper] here in Durban or they'll quote other figures, individuals that they feel they can associate with something else away from SASO.

Particularly the non-Africans?

Yes. The strategy of security is also to create alienation between Africans and Indians in Durban and between Africans and Coloureds in the Western Cape. The least affected people, or the least terrorized people in a sense are leadership, the very, very top leadership. But the lower echelons will make it possible for whole chunks of campuses to affiliate, are the ones who are persecuted so that link can be broken. The students at Durban-Westville, for instance; their leadership ranks there were in SASO. Pressure was very heavy there, both from security and from their university, which has been given definite instructions to cut this link. And the same thing happens in the Western Cape, the guys who are links between that campus and SASO are the ones who are being chopped.

Otherwise, on the African campuses there's an interesting phenomenon. The universities are always against SASO, definitely, we feel very uncomfortable. But there is apparently an order that they must observe some measure of acceptance of SASO. And hence they cannot victimize SASO personnel on African campuses. What they do is to find small little technical things to break the link between SASO locally in the campus and SASO national. They'll say, for instance, as at Fort Hare, "Your president has attacked this university, and therefore we cannot pay fees to SASO on your behalf"; and they don't pay fees. But they don't go on to say disaffiliate from SASO or anything like that.

Or at Turfloop, after the SRC had been thrown away, and various students had been expelled for participating in the strike, we thought when the SASO men come the principal is going to say, "Oh, SASO is quite welcome"-and they start operating as

soon as we restore order, or as soon as we restore the SRC amongst the student ranks. So they're playing a sort of double game, in the sense that they've been given this mandate to accommodate SASO, but they can also see, being on the spot, most of the problems *vis-a-vis* students and staff arise primarily because of the impetus coming from SASO ranks.

It still seems inconsistent to me. If they really do want to destroy SASO, why bother with the lower echelons? Why not just ban the top twenty or the movement itself?

Their whole philosophy is directed at (1) sounding sincere to the white electorate about apartheid and so many other things. They don't really bother about us. Now if they ban anything which is not inconsistent with apartheid, then the opposition jumps in, in the same way the opposition was against SASO, or the SASO ideology. When SASO becomes banned, the liberals, the Progressives and the United Party are going to unite to say the Nationalist government is insincere about apartheid. Here you are, with these people having this thing on their own campuses-you see. This is a problem. And they know this. So that they are quite happy with containing the movement, if they can contain it, and allowing it to exist. Because of another fact also: it also gives credibility. If SASO can speak out and at the same time remain harmless, well and good.

The Helen Suzman effect.

That's right. The calculation they have made-it's a dangerous calculation, but I think they are prepared to gamble with it. If it turned out in a major conference of Afrikaners that there was some major discontent because of the growth of black power or black consciousness in this country you would get within one week the Prime Minister ordering a complete arrest or ban of the leadership. Then they defy the world at that point. Because they try the other way first, of appeasing the world, appeasing the opposition, appeasing the general electorate by containing the blacks for as far as it is possible. When it is impossible, then they use drastic-to assure now their own electorate, which is mainly Afrikaner, that they are still in power.

In your own mind, do you project forward any probable timetable for when this stage might be reached? Do you think there's a very finite amount of time involved?

I wouldn't be able to say in a precise way. One thing is when you make calculations or assumptions about white society, you must make the observation that it is deaf to black opinion, very deaf, deliberately. And when that does happen, it is likely to be too late. Too late for them to stop whatever has started. This is the only

calculation I can make, but how long it will take, I don't know. They still listen to the debate about the Broederbond right now. Those are very insignificant questions, but it's a major thing within their ranks. They are so busy talking among themselves they're too busy to think about the other guy.

Just English versus Afrikaner politics.

Yah. They are convinced of one thing: the power of their security. Even the average white man who is anti-system, when he thinks of any possible threat from blacks, he relies very heavily on the existence of a very powerful security. And none of us would doubt that it's a very powerful security in terms of weapons, in terms of so many things. But it's also a stupid security. They depend a hell of a lot on gadgets for detecting information. But they are limited in the extent to which they can analyze whatever information they get: limited by their own prejudices against blacks.

PAC, quite frankly, was banned for its show of strength more than anything else. They were happy when PAC broke off from ANC, but it was a very short-lived happiness. Suddenly PAC began to demonstrate that it could move people in certain ways. And the PAC approach was a very emotional approach, which could lead to short-term action. Now whites feel uncomfortable against that. You look at the marches that led to Sharpeville and the Langa incidents. Any intelligent person would know that this is a very impotent lot of people. They were unarmed people. But white society can't stand that kind of thing. To them it always signals what they expect in their subconscious: a major revolt. They would have to shoot at some stage. Because blacks just can't take a beating without fighting back. Once you're in that type of mood, I don't care who says what, whether we're three or four or five, I don't see a policeman hitting me and me standing there and not doing anything. Because to me he's an enemy, all the time. He couldn't be doing that on my behalf.

The student revolts were directed at the black community to demonstrate (a) solidarity, and (b) determination, on the part of black students to reject what they don't want, and to be prepared to suffer for that. And it worked, insofar as that's concerned. It didn't work with the individual parents of the individual children. But the black community as a whole has learnt a fantastic lesson from that. You used to get this kind of thing before: the students are great talkers. But with that kind of background they couldn't say it any more. Here were students marching out of varsity, offering to march out of varsity, and knowing that they've got no ready-made society that they're walking into. A lot of them are still outside. So that it has heightened the receptivity of the community to student opinion. But as for what step two is, we don't know. It's subject to so many forces and interpretations and so on. We have individual opinions, that may not be well formulated either. One doesn't know or wouldn't like to say anything about it.

As you look at the economy of this country, what trends or factors in it do you feel are working toward the fulfillment of the long term ends of blacks?

One can only say this in comparison to something else. If you look at the system managed and run by Nationalists it's preferable to the system as managed and run by the United Party, and still more preferable to the system as managed and run by the Progressive Party. In the sense that Nationalists have not perfected their capitalist system. One of the elements of capitalism for instance is to create a discontented middle-class group among the ranks of those you are excluding from the mainstream of the country's economy. In other words, if you are dealing with a group of people who identify through one fact, for example the color of their skins, if you want to then exclude the bulk of those people, you have to give something back to a few of them in order to create amongst them a middle-class which is going to be a buffer zone, so to speak, between you and the masses who you are exploiting. So what's happening in this country is that blacks don't have a very strong or large middle-class.

So that the one effect of apartheid in a sense is that it is a great leveler. Blacks don't have a very strong or large middle-class. It's concentrated to mainly the Indian community, that is the black middle-class, so to speak. Most black people are about the same on an urban basis. And most black people are about the same on a rural basis. Out in the country, for example, each family is allowed a maximum say of seven cows, and five sheep, one pig, that type of thing. And people can only improve up to that point. And at that point they remain steady, there's a sort of a similarity in the community.

If you look at the housing scheme of the Nationalists, it's a four-roomed basis for everybody in a township. The means of transport is bus and train for everybody. So the people participate in the same things they share so many common interests. It's a perfect system for identification, common identification. So what I'm trying to suggest is that there is this constant jarring effect of the system on the people, which makes it possible for quick organization around certain central issues.

Now whereas if you were working under a Progressive [Party] system, then you would get stratification creeping in, with your masses remaining where they are or getting poorer, and your cream of leadership, which is invariably derived from the so-called educated people, beginning to enter bourgeois ranks: admitted into town, able to vote, developing new attitudes and new friends for their movements. So you'd get a completely different tone. And this is one country where it would be possible to create a capitalist black society. If whites were intelligent. If the Nationalists were intelligent. And that capitalist black society, black middle-class, would be very effective at an important stage. Primarily because a hell of a lot of

blacks here have got a bit of education-I'm taking comparatively speaking-to the so-called rest of Africa, and a hell of a lot of them could compete favorably with whites in the fields of industry, commerce, and professions. And South Africa could succeed to put across to the world a pretty convincing, integrated picture, with still 70 percent of the population being underdogs.

But the whites are terribly afraid of this. You see now, they've built up this race yardstick beyond all proportions, and it is beginning to scare them, even in their own little nice world. Hence the separate doors, separate entrances, separate toilets, separate this - rubbish. My own interpretation of the system is, therefore, that we have the best economic system for a revolution. And the evils of it are so pointed and so clear, and therefore make teaching of alternative methods, more meaningful methods, more indigenous methods even, much easier under the present sort of setup. And the growth of the townships in the pattern that they are now growing makes communication also all that much easier. Communication not necessarily through shared platforms, shared meetings and so on, but communication of ideas through a shared, common stimulus. Because everybody has to stay in a specific area. I'm talking here mainly about the African population. If I go to Jo'burg I know automatically, I don't have to choose: I just have to go and stay in Soweto, whether I could afford a house in Lower Houghton or not.

So this thing of talking for or on behalf of the masses is nonsense, because you live with them, you stay with them; you make your inputs primarily because you are there, and no physical distance or intellectual distance is ultimately created. A guy who's a priest or a teacher or something like this in an area is forced by circumstances to relate to the neighbors that society has created for him. He doesn't choose neighbors. So that he carves his place in that community. Alright, he might be regarded as a man of major import, primarily because he can put several words together much faster than anybody else, but the important thing is that even he himself sees himself as a member of that community. And in this whole conscientization program, this is what makes ideas so easily flow across amongst people; this common ghetto experience that blacks are subjected to.

Course: African Revolutionary Writing

20071, Steve Biko, Interview with Gail Gerhart, 24 October 1972

10013 words